



Agència  
per a la Qualitat  
del Sistema Universitari  
de Catalunya

# AQU EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE REPORT

AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA (UAB)  
STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMME

23 November 2012

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Approved by the AQU Quality Assessment Commission (CAQ) on 11 December 2012

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of the External Quality Assurance process used by the Catalan university quality assurance agency AQU to determine whether the UAB Study Abroad Programme should be granted recognition. The purpose of the AQU external quality assurance process is to ensure compliance with international standards of quality assurance in higher education.

AQU was asked by the UAB's Study Abroad Programme to assess the quality of its current activities, with a particular focus on the 15-week Pre-established Programme. The AQU panel carried out a review process that is in alignment with current international accreditation standards in higher education. It represents the first time that the programme has undergone an external quality assurance process and the first time that AQU recognition has been requested for a study abroad programme. To guide the pilot evaluation, AQU published in advance a "Guide to the External Quality Assurance of the Study Abroad Programme".

Following the review process, the panel concluded that the UAB's Pre-Established Study Abroad Program should be given external recognition by AQU. In accordance with AQU's requirements, the panel also identified several positive features of the program and drew up a series of recommendations for improving the programme in the short and long term.

Among the positive features of the programme noted by the panel was the programme's readiness to consider change and the self-critical attitude shown by its willingness to submit itself to an external review process. The panel also commended the Programme for its committed and enthusiastic staff and the close engagement of teaching staff with students.

In its short-term recommendations, the panel suggests that the UAB Study Abroad Programme specify in written form details of the learning objectives for the program as a whole and for the modules within it. The panel also urges the programme to state credit volume and level in relation to each module, making explicit reference to the system of ECTS and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), as well as to the U.S. system of credit. In general, the panel recommends that the program take a more systematic approach toward quality management and introduce key processes such as recording its strategy for quality and mapping out ways to measure the performance of the program in a more comprehensive manner.

In terms of the long term future of the UAB Study Abroad Programme, the panel recommends that the University reassess the extent of its direct control of the programme's operational management, particularly in areas such as the website and consider allowing more flexibility so that it can be more responsive to the needs of students prior to and during the programme. The Programme should also consider whether its current offerings fulfil the needs of a significant group of students whose primary area of study or "major" is Spanish, possibly introducing courses in this language that focus on specific subjects.

## 2. REVIEW PROCESS

The AQU review methodology featured four stages: the formulation of explicit review criteria, the production of a self-evaluation report, an external site visit with an international external panel and a report. Members of the review panel, who were all appointed by AQU, were the following:

**Prof. David Timms**, Chair, Higher Education Consultant

**Dr. Tine Holm**, QA expert, The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA)

**Pranava Madhyastha**, Ph.D. in Artificial Intelligence candidate, UPC

**Larisa Tatge**, QA expert/ secretariat, Consultant

**Dr. Zhanna Kuzminykh**, external observer, National Centre of Public Accreditation, Russia, Head of the International Relations Department

**Eva Benito**, external observer, AQU, Management Assistant Advisor

The panel conducted its site visit on October 25-26, 2012. The UAB's self-assessment report was provided to members of the review panel prior to the site visit. This report included an internal evaluation and the results of the two focus groups involving students and teaching staff.

The 2-day site visit included meetings with the following individuals and groups:

- Members of the UAB Self-Assessment Committee
- Members of the Academic Committee of the Study Abroad Programme
- Non-academic staff supporting the Study Abroad Programme
- Director of the UAB Study Abroad Programme
- Academic Staff
- Students in the Pre-established Programme
- UAB and UAB Foundation representatives (vice-rector for international relations and chief executive officer of the UAB Foundation)

During the visit, members of the review panel were provided the opportunity to visit the UAB's three programme locations: the UAB's central campus in Bellaterra, the Eixample campus and the Sant Pau campus. UAB staff provided guided tours of the facilities at the sites and organized meetings with the different stakeholder groups. All meetings with administrators, professors and students were conducted in English. While there were some minor changes, the original schedule for the meetings was generally followed.

Although the panel also met with students in the Study Abroad Programme's "Regular" Programme (within which international students attend and are assessed in the modules offered to UAB home students) this dimension of the UAB's Study Abroad Programme was not the focus of the AQU assessment process.

At the close of the visit, the Review Panel presented an oral report of its findings and recommendations to UAB Study Abroad Programme representatives. This report provides a full

summary of the conclusions of the quality assurance process and the panel's final recommendations.

### 3. PROGRAMME QUALITY

The panel recommends that UAB's Pre-Established Study Abroad Programme should be given external recognition by AQU. The following is a general comment on the overall quality of the UAB's Study Abroad Programme, taking into consideration five critical dimensions, as required by AQU (objectives, resources, delivery, sustainability and results of the programme), and three main questions:

- Is the UAB adequately organised to manage and run the Study Abroad Programme?
- Is the Study Abroad Programme a product of interest for the students?
- Is the academic level of the programme in accordance with university standards?

#### a. Objectives

The University has clearly identified the Study Abroad Programme as an integral part of its institution-wide process of internationalization. The Programme was created to serve international students seeking to study for a short period of time at the UAB and to "create multinational and multicultural environments for the enrichment of local students," as stated in the UAB's internal evaluation report.

While the Programme has been successful in running and managing its activities, it has not yet articulated, in written form, detailed objectives in the sense of learning outcomes for students or a long term strategy for quality. Learning outcomes should take into consideration the specific nature of the Programme. The panel would like to stress that teaching and learning internationalization is a specific type of learning process and takes place in a specific type of environment.

Within the Programme, there is a heavy reliance on informal communication, outside of periodic meetings, to maintain the coherence and quality of the program. While the panel was impressed by the level of enthusiasm and commitment of the staff, the Programme may need a more formalized approach involving the Academic Committee in order to identify achievable objectives, maintain university-level standards and measure performance in the future. The Academic Committee could contribute to the quality management of the programme more actively through written reports.

Benchmarking within the Programme is limited to interaction with representatives of universities at major conferences, such as NAFSA. The panel saw nothing in the way of data-based comparisons with other higher education institutions e.g. equivalent types of programmes or reference to external international guidelines for academic programmes, whether for "visiting" students' programs or conventional ones.

Though elements of the program have been mapped on to the U.S. system of credit, credit volume for courses has not been clearly aligned with the system of ECTS and the European

Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). Such mapping would provide a clearer measure of standards and make the qualifications more transferable between European institutions.

## **b. Programme resources**

Currently, agencies that refer students to the UAB Study Abroad Programme have an important impact on the organization of non-academic aspects of the programme and the information students receive before they arrive on campus and during their studies. This causes some variation in the quality of information students receive, with some students having access to very complete information about the Programme, while others do not have this.

The panel was informed that the Programme is developing a more comprehensive website, which should serve to enhance communication with students in the future, though it appears that general UAB regulations governing web-presence has inhibited fulfilment of the special needs of international students. At present, very few extra-curricular activities are organized for students in the UAB Study Abroad Programme. This is in part because many students participate in agency-run cultural activities, which in some cases are quite broad in scope. It is recognized that the Programme offers the Tandem language exchange program, in which students can learn and practice another language while meeting other university students and learning about their cultures.

It may be worthwhile considering whether the Programme should organize more cultural activities to enhance the international learning experience it seeks to offer. In addition, introductory courses the Catalan language should be considered, since a growing number of students (currently 12 per cent) indicate they are interested in these.

Because students follow all of their courses at the Sant Pau and Eixample campuses, which are located in the centre of Barcelona, they rarely have contact with students on the UAB's main campus in Bellaterra or participate in activities that take place there. The panel recognizes that efforts have been made to introduce students to the main campus. However, the Programme may need to consider new ways to facilitate contact among students in the Programme and UAB students who are from Spain.

As the Programme becomes more internationally diverse, staff members are challenged with verifying a wider range of academic transcripts in relation to prior qualifications. Transcripts are verified internally and few cases of falsification have been identified to date. However, it appears that the system for verification is heavily dependent on the experience of a single individual.

The panel noted that the Sant Pau campus is equipped to accommodate students with physical disabilities who attend the Pre-established Programme, but the Eixample campus is not.

## **c. Delivery**

Students in the Pre-established Programme generally express great satisfaction with the academic content and quality of teaching offered by the UAB Study Abroad Programme,

stressing the high level of authority and the dedication and personal involvement of the teaching staff.

In the syllabi of the different modules, however, there is some variation in the specifications of learning outcomes and the key skills and competencies students should acquire following the modules. Widely accepted bibliographic standards and formats are not always employed in the syllabi. During the on-site visit, some students expressed that they would like the professors to provide a wider range of recommended reading material, beyond the required texts.

Although professors are recruited from the University, which upholds high pedagogical standards, the teaching staff does not have access to regular training sessions after joining the Programme. Moreover, there is no written, formalized learning and teaching strategy to guide professors or help new professors who enter the Programme, which is characterized by a highly international learning environment.

#### **d. Sustainability**

Most programme information is maintained by one person, the Head of Administration of the Study Abroad Programme. There is a danger that administrative problems could arise if this person were not immediately available, particularly in view of the fact that some decisions are not recorded in a retrievable way that might inform others. Also, there is no official tracking system for former students, which should be considered.

Questionnaires are employed to assess students' levels of satisfaction at the end of each semester and students have the opportunity to write in comments and suggestions. Because communication is very fluid among academic and administrative staff, many improvements are made and assessed on an informal basis.

Although the panel recognizes that enhancements are continuously implemented, the range of evaluative activities should fit within a strategy for quality and the outcomes should be analysed and recorded in a systematic way to ensure the consistent and measurable progress of the Programme's quality according to the stated learning objectives of the Programme. The results should regularly be presented to the Academic Committee.

#### **e. Results of the programme**

The tables describing the academic results of formal assessment of Study Abroad students show a high rate of successful achievement, though the panel considered that the management of the program could use these outcomes in a more coherent way, i.e. within a quality strategy.

The panel noted that the number of students attending the UAB Study Abroad Pre-established Programme has risen steadily in recent years, an important indicator of the program's attractiveness and that of the UAB as a foreign study destination for students from all over the world.

At the same time, the origin of the students is diversifying, with more students from Latin America and Africa, in particular, entering the program. Most students - 70 per cent - come from the United States.

The percentage of students who enrol in the programme directly, rather through agencies, is on the rise. The number of students who enrol through agencies has decreased from 88 per cent in 2009/2010 from 70 per cent in 2012/2013.

In view of these developments, the Programme should map out a long-term future strategy for on-going quality improvement and specific targets for results of the Programme.

#### **4. POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED ELEMENTS**

In line with AQU requirements, the panel named several positively identified elements, bearing in mind the five dimensions evaluated: objectives, resources, delivery, sustainability and results of the programme.

The following elements were identified:

- The Programme team's readiness to consider criticism and change, demonstrated in their choosing to submit themselves to the review process, and in the meetings throughout
- The Programme team's realistic objectives for improvement
- The way the programme team has given the students a sense of identity despite the variety of their backgrounds and the limits on opportunities for engagement.
- The Programme's focus on structured academic content
- The Programme's committed and enthusiastic staff, academic and non-academic
- The close engagement of teaching staff with students
- The high quality and authoritative body of academic staff
- The learning environment, especially in relation to class sizes and the teaching approaches that this encourages
- With some qualifications about the Eixample facilities, the quality of the Barcelona campuses
- The review team affirms the Programme's intention to improve the training for teaching staff, and to introduce of a 'virtual learning environment' to facilitate teaching and communications between staff and students

## 5. SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel identified the following short-term recommendations:

- The Programme should draw up a “programme specification” with objectives for both the programme as a whole and for the modules within it. In relation to the modules, the objectives should consist of more explicit learning outcomes, differentiating knowledge outcomes from key skills and competencies. Module outlines should also include a wider range of reading for those students whose interests extend beyond the key texts.
- The Programme should state credit volume and level in relation to each module, making explicit reference to the system of ECTS and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), as well as to the U.S. system of credit.
- The Programme should formulate and publish learning and teaching strategy, which will provide a framework for current practice, and facilitate the introduction of new staff into the Programme.
- The Programme should take a more systematic approach to quality management, and in particular should:
  - Record its strategy for quality in a permanent form;
  - Consider ways to measure the performance of the programme additional to the use of questionnaires;
  - Make fuller use of the Academic Committee, and facilitate its contributions by means of written reports.

## 6. LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel identified the following long-term recommendations:

- The University should consider whether its best interests are served by limiting the Programme’s operational management in relation to such matters as its website and its use of centrally provided university services.
- The Programme should consider whether its current offerings fulfil the requirements of the significant group of students whose background course of study includes a Spanish ‘Major’.
- The Programme should consider the introduction of a beginner’s course in Catalan.

## 7. THE REVIEW PROCESS

The external review panel considered that the Internal Evaluation Report provided a useful description of the programme on which to base its investigations.

However, the panel found that the report lacked the analytical and critical approach demonstrated by staff in meetings and did not make effective use of the range of information available to it. In the self-grading portion of the report, the Programme indicated high marks, even in areas where programme staff indicated there was clear need for improvement.

Finally, the site visit was well-organized and generally went very smoothly. Overall, the panel views that the AQU process met acceptable international standards for measuring and evaluating quality in university-level programmes such as the UAB's Study Abroad Programme.